

## Spaces of Strategic Adaptation

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Calabar, Nigeria is a city of continual fragmentation and transformation. Previously known as Old Calabar, the city's decentralized urban landscape challenges hidebound characterizations of African cities as spatially distant and timeless entities, disconnected from the world at large. Calabar has a rich, multi-ethnic, and cosmopolitan history as an international trading emporium and slaving port extending back centuries (Fig. 1). Much scholarly attention has been paid to the history of the city, though the few histories which explicitly address the traditional and colonial architecture of Calabar is often quite general. Focusing on discrete formalized elements, they inadequately address the social, economic, and spiritual forces that have informed the city's urban character. Far from existing in a homeostatic condition, the spatial politics in Calabar have been characterized by internecine warfare, competing trade houses, and fraught encounters between foreign, local, and otherworldly agents such as those associated with the Ekpe secret society and Christianity (Fig. 2). The flexible and mobile spaces making up the city's urban fabric since its beginnings in the sixteenth century have been linked with diasporic and transnational flows of people, capital, and culture. It is argued that these impermanent and networked architectures prefigure the architectural spaces of neoliberalism existing globally today (Fig. 3).

Borrowing the concept of "paradigmatic spaces", this research is organized around a series of spatial designations, or diagrams of spatial relationships that were exemplary during a given time period in Calabar's urban history. This research employs four spatial paradigms as representative of particular socio-historical relationships in Calabar—the traditional Efik compound, the Ekpe lodge, the Iron Place of King Eyamba V, and the colonial era Old Residency (Figs. 4-7). The historical imbrication of these four models combined with a flexible application of their spatio-temporal boundaries, provide a useful matrix for understanding the architectural and urban history of Calabar.

In taking a historical perspective in analyzing Calabar's built environment, this study complicates linear assumptions about progress and backwardness in the scholarship on globalization and cities. The enclave zones in contemporary Calabar are not a new phenomenon or anomalous after-effects of neoliberalism, but spaces entangled in the spiritual and economic history of the city. Though the project seeks to describe instances of congruence between pre-modern and contemporary Calabar, the purpose is to describe how spatial conditions from various historical periods can co-exist in non-linear ways, linking, competing, and contesting one another.

At each historical moment in Calabar's history, different aspects were prioritized. It is speculated the spaces of strategic adaptation in the city served as interfaces between different groups, but also as portals or thresholds between life worlds—spatially and temporally (Fig. 8). While the appearance and representation of spaces may suggest a clear inside-outside relationship, the lived reality of Calabar's space-time fabric reveals that they were sites of transition, intermixture, and association. These spaces linked the forested regions of the interior with the trade routes of the Atlantic, while also connecting economic spaces of exchange with those of mythic spiritual entities.

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Fig. 1. A View of Calabar (1725) (Source: Le commerce de l'Amérique par Marseille, 1764. Engravings by Serge Daget.



Fig. 3. Tinapa Free Zone and Resort, Nollywood film studio, Calabar, Nigeria (Source: Photograph by the author, 2012).

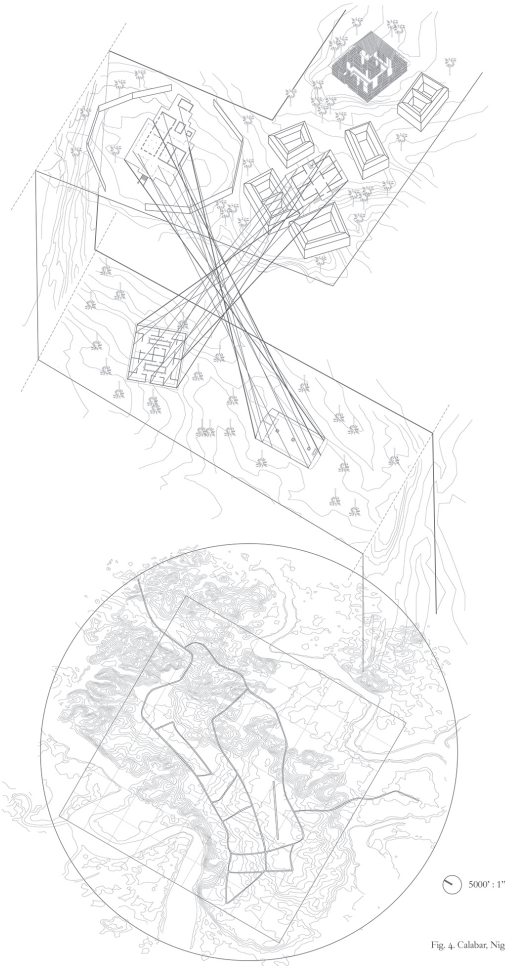


Fig. 4. Calabar, Nigeria (Source: drawing by the author, 2017).



Fig. 2. Image of Nkanda Grade of Egho with Emblem Ekabe Nkanda (1912) (Source: Percy Amaury Talbot, In the Shadow of the Bush, plate facing 42).

## Spaces of Strategic Adaptation Calabar, Nigeria

### Spaces of Strategic Adaptation

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Diagrams made with Scott Kralath, Student, Syracuse University

Calabar, Nigeria is a city of continual fragmentation and transformation. Previously known as Old Calabar, the city's decentralized urban landscape challenges widespread characterizations of African cities as spatially distant and timeless entities, disconnected from the world at large. Calabar has a rich, multi-ethnic, and cosmopolitan history as an international trading emporium and diving port extending back centuries (Fig. 1). Much scholarly attention has been paid to the history of the city, though the few histories which explicitly address the traditional and colonial architecture of Calabar is often quite general. Focusing on discrete formalized elements, they inadequately address the social, economic, and spiritual forces that have informed the city's urban character. Far from existing in a homogenous condition, the spatial politics in Calabar have been characterized by intersective warfare, competing trade houses, and fraught encounters between foreign, local, and otherworldly agents such as those associated with the Ekpe secret society and Christianity (Fig. 2). The flexible and mobile spaces making up the city's urban fabric since its beginnings in the sixteenth century have been linked with diasporic and transnational flows of people, capital, and culture. It is argued that these impermanent and reworked architectures prefigure the architectural spaces of neoliberalism existing globally today (Fig. 3). Borrowing the concept of "paradigmatic spaces", this research is organized around a series of spatial designations, or diagrams of spatial relationships that were exemplary during a given time period in Calabar's urban history. This research employs four spatial paradigms as representative of particular socio-historical relationships in Calabar—the traditional Efik compound, the Ekpe lodge, the Iron Palace of King Eyamba V, and the colonial era Old Residency (Figs. 4-7). The historical imbrication of these four models combined with a flexible application of their spatio-temporal boundaries, provide a useful matrix for understanding the architectural and urban history of Calabar. In taking a historical perspective in analyzing Calabar's built environment, this study complicates linear assumptions about progress and backwardness in the scholarship on globalization and cities. The exclusive noises in contemporary Calabar are not a new phenomenon or anomalous after-effects of neoliberalism, but spaces entangled in the spiritual and economic history of the city. Though the project seeks to describe instances of congruence between pre-modern and contemporary Calabar, the purpose is to describe how spatial conditions from various historical periods can co-exist in non-linear ways, linking, competing, and contesting one another. At each historical moment in Calabar's history, different aspects were prioritized. It is speculated the spaces of strategic adaptation in the city served as interfaces between different groups, but also as portals or thresholds between life worlds—spatially and temporally (Fig. 8). While the appearance and representation of spaces may suggest a clear inside-outside relationship, the lived reality of Calabar's space-time fabric reveals that they were sites of transition, intermixture, and association. These spaces linked the forested regions of the interior with the trade routes of the Atlantic, while also connecting economic spaces of exchange with those of mythic spiritual entities.

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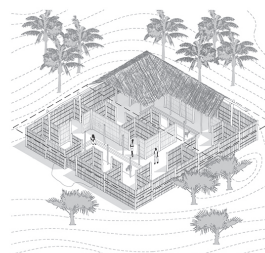


Fig. 4. Traditional Efik Compound, c. 1650

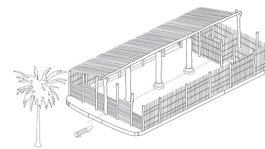


Fig. 5. Ekpe Shrine, c. 1700

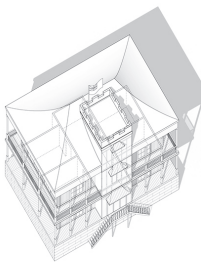


Fig. 6. Iron Palace of King Eyamba V, 1843

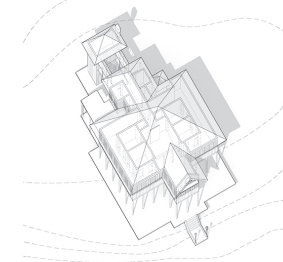


Fig. 7. Old Residency, c. 1884